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Postfeminist, engaged and resistant: Evangelical male clergy attitudes towards gender and women's ordination in the Church of England

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Abstract

Despite the introduction of female bishops, women do not hold offices on equal terms with men in the Church of England, where conservative evangelical male clergy often reject the validity of women's ordination. This article explores the gender values of such clergy, investigating how they are expressed and the factors that shape them. Data is drawn from semi-structured interviews and is interpreted with thematic narrative analysis. The themes were analyzed with theories on postfeminism, engaged orthodoxy and group schism. It is argued that participants' gender values are best understood as postfeminist and that the wider evangelical tradition, as well as a perceived change in Anglican identity with the onset of women's ordination, shape their postfeminism. Moreover, whilst evangelical gender values possess the potential to foster greater gender equality within the Church of England, gender differentiation limits this possibility, a limitation that could be addressed by increasing participants' engagement beyond the Church.

Keywords

Gender, postfeminism, Church of England, evangelical, feminism, clergy

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Introduction

Despite a significant decrease in church attendance over the last sixty years (British Social Attitudes 2018; Davie 2015), the Church of England (CofE), has continued to hold a privileged place in English society due to a number of historical and institutional factors, not least its position as the established church (see Ganiel and Jones 2012; Guest, Olson, and Wolffe 2012). However, there is an evident contrast in gender values between the CofE and many members of English society, where gender equality has become an espoused normative value in a less overtly Christian Britain (e.g., Brown and Woodhead 2016). In contradistinction, the ecclesial structures of the CofE are designed to allow for unequal terms of tenure between its male and female priests. Clergy in the Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical traditions in particular are frequently among those who protest the ordination of women to the priesthood (Jones 2004). Here, the term ‘conservative evangelical’ refers to those evangelicals who have maintained traditional evangelical beliefs over the last century (see Bebbington 1989).

The CofE decided to ordain women as priests in November 1992, with the first ordinations taking place in March 1994. However, before and after these events, clerical women have faced verbal abuse, physical assault, and professional discrimination. For instance, prior to their ordination as priests, women were subjected to sexist jokes from the pulpit (Storkey 1985). In recent years women have also frequently reported sexist ridicule by male parishioners and clergy, something that became more visible in the light of the #MeToo campaign (Jagger 2017). Since women have been able to become priests such discrimination has been accompanied by legislation that permits male clergy to refuse to work with their female colleagues if they possess a gender traditionalist theology and thus believe women’s ordination to be inappropriate. For instance, when women were first ordained, a male priest with traditionalist gender values could arrange for their church to undergo a process that would either restrict the duties that women priests could undertake or prevent them from working there altogether (Bagilhole 2003; Maltby 1998; Thorne 2000).

This legislation was withdrawn after the CofE decided to consecrate women as bishops in July 2014. However, it was replaced with a provision for gender traditionalists to refuse to align themselves with a woman bishop and instead place themselves under the authority of a male bishop with similar theological convictions to themselves when their bishop does not have them (Flying Bishops 2018). Nevertheless, no provision has ever been made for churches to express that they might prefer a woman priest (Maltby 1998) or for a diocese to indicate preference for a woman bishop. The CofE, therefore, operates in such a way that openly discriminates against women and privileges men.

It is paradoxical that the CofE should permit discrimination against women while remaining the established church given the gender values of the society in which it is situated. However, while British law typically prohibits organizations from gender discrimination, it makes exemptions for religious institutions (Sex Discrimination Act 1975, 1975; Equality Act 2010). Some quarters of the CofE objected to this legislation, fearing that it could lead to the Church’s exempt status being revoked, but the provisions for religious organizations within this legislation are now utilized by the CofE, which has tended to favor the prevention of schism over and above equality. This is despite the fact that, since 1975, its official position has been that there are no theological grounds for barring women from the priesthood (Furlong 2000).

Nevertheless, while this concerns social phenomena at the macro level, it is important to remember that much of this discrimination occurs at the micro level. It is male parish priests who refuse to work with women in various capacities or accept their newfound authority as bishops. Hence, further understanding of gender discrimination in the CofE requires an investigation of the factors that shape the beliefs about women's ordination held by male clergy persons. This means exploring the content of their gender values and the factors that inform them. Such research is necessary in order to tackle gender inequality within the Church. As Storkey (1985) states, by exposing the particular discriminatory beliefs that manifest themselves within an institution, one is in a better position to address them.

The evangelical tradition is the most resistant to denominational decline (Brierley 2018), and so it is worth exploring the gender values of clergy in this branch of the Church in particular because, in time, it could become the largest tradition of the CofE (Brierley 2020). More specifically, in this article, I will examine their beliefs about the roles that men and women ought to have in the wider society as well as in the Church because, as will be seen, beliefs about the ordination of women are informed by their broader gender values as they exhibit a belief in a universal, biologically determined design that applies to all persons across different contexts. I will also explore the attitudes they have towards other gender values because these attitudes shape their own values. Due to the widespread inclusion of various feminist values into those of the British population (Aune 2006), this will involve an exploration of how my interlocutors navigate feminism.

Previous research

Much scholarship on women's ordination in the CofE has—for good reason—focused on the experiences of women (e.g., Francis and Robbins 1999). However, despite the fact that the CofE is a male dominated institution, where men have often determined the fate of women within its hierarchy (Aldridge 1989, Bagilhole 2003), few studies have sought to understand why some male clergy hold traditionalist gender values. Moreover, much time has elapsed since many of these studies were conducted, and even amongst the most recent ones there is little focus on either the context of evangelicalism or male clergy.

Nason-Clark (1987a) has argued that theological interpretation alone is unable to account for men's traditionalist gender values and that religion can serve as a means to express sexist views because of the historic symbols of women that may be found within Christianity. However, since this time, the presence of women in ordained ministry will, in all likelihood, have challenged the accuracy of at least some of these symbols (see Bagilhole 2006; Nason-Clark 1987b), suggesting that this alone cannot account for opposition to women's ordained ministry.

Aldridge (1989) has posited that clergymen were ambivalent to the ordination of women to the priesthood in the 1980s because male clergy could isolate themselves from women priests if they so wished, due to the working structures of the CofE. Nonetheless, at this point in time, women's ordination as priests was not a concrete reality. Since Aldridge's research, the ministry of male priests is more directly impacted by the ordination of women. The presence of women in more senior posts, such as bishops, means that men are not only more likely to come into contact with ordained women, but also that these women can be in positions of authority over them. It is thus necessary to explore how beliefs about the ordination of women have developed.

Sani and Reicher (2000) have used self-categorization theory as a way of understanding the causes of protest exhibited by Anglo-Catholic priests in the run up to the first ordinations of women in 1994. They argued that the introduction of women priests led some to perceive that the historic identity of the CofE was under threat, leading them to express schismatic behaviour towards it. However, while they employed a theory that is widely applicable and empirically supported, they did not focus on evangelical clergy. Nevertheless, Village (2012) has conducted a study of Anglo-Catholic, broad church, and evangelical Anglicans, concluding that how they self-identify religiously, and their tradition's history, strongly correlates with their current beliefs about gender roles. However, while undoubtedly valuable, quantitative research of this nature does not offer a window into how these beliefs manifest *in situ*. Given that gender is an embodied phenomenon, present in real life contexts (e.g., see Heinämaa 2012), it is important to understand how clergy perceive their gender values to work out in their lives, and what this highlights with respect to the factors that shape them.

Nyhaugen (2018) has drawn on Bartkowski (2000) to argue that white, middle class, lay, Anglican men articulate both instrumentalist and expressive notions of masculinity. That is, these men believe that certain characteristics are intrinsic to one's sex, but that while some characteristics are typically female, males can aspire to incorporate some of these into their own lives. Similarly, Delap (2013) has argued that, during the twentieth century, Anglican men often evinced inter-personal ties and that concepts such as love were not thought to be intrinsically feminine but were a part of the Christian discourse on masculinity. Recent though these studies are, they do not explore gender values specifically amongst the clergy, the group most directly impacted by the advent of women bishops, nor do they seek to understand the relationship between Christian gender values and recent developments within the CofE.

Brown (2011) has challenged normative assumptions pertaining to the belief that women were more religious, and men less so, during the last century. His work draws on a number of data sets to posit that, from the 1960s, it was women rather than men who were either moving away from the church and/or more difficult for the Church to attract, indicating that male religiosity has been underestimated in scholarship. This provides a further reason to explore the gender values of male clergy in particular. I have considered some of the social psychological factors that shape the beliefs about gender held by evangelical male clergy and argued that a reduction in their privileged (often white, and middle-class) status contributes to the resistance that this group can exhibit towards the ordination of women (Fry 2019a, 2019b). However, it is also important to consider other social factors at play, given that explanations which consider psychological functions alone do not provide sufficient explanatory power for understanding social phenomena (see Seybold 2007).

In this article, I offer an up-to-date analysis of the gender values of male clergy who oppose the ordination of women to the priesthood *and* their consecration as bishops. Now that women may enter any office of the Church's hierarchy, becoming more authoritative than the male priests in their diocese when they are bishops, women's ordained ministry is presently a fuller reality than it has been previously. In light of this, I explore how ordained conservative evangelical men articulate their gender values within the milieu of increased women's authority in the CofE. I also explore the factors that shape these values, shedding light on an under-researched topic within one of England's most historic institutions. I argue that this group of clergy articulates gender values that are best understood as postfeminist, and that this includes an incorporation of the feminist ideal of equality in addition to a

rejection of challenges to gender differentiation found in some strands of feminism. I further argue that their gender values are shaped by the wider conservative evangelical tradition, and by a perceived change in Anglican identity, which accompanied an increase in egalitarian gender values in the CofE.

Feminism and postfeminism

Harris (1999) has written that feminism has never had a unified definition or approach. However, some scholars have separated it into a number of distinct ‘waves’ and have argued that each one carries a set of identifiable characteristics. In the UK, the so-called first wave, which is typically thought to have begun shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, primarily sought to enfranchise women. From the 1960s onwards ‘second wave’ feminism furthered the rights of women by challenging the lack of opportunities for them outside of the domestic sphere, as well as their subservient place within the home (Pilarski 2011), and it tended to take the binary understanding of the sexes as male or female for granted instead of questioning these categories (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon 2002).

Since the 1990s feminism, now in what some refer to as the third wave, has become influenced by critical theorists such as Michel Foucault through the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993). Such analyses of gender and sex question the binary understandings of female/male bodies (see also Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012). Building on developments within so-called second wave scholarship that considered the importance of race within feminism (e.g., Carby 1987), ‘third wave’ scholarship also often recognizes that the struggle against oppression is multi-faceted and intersectional, meaning that the fight for equality cannot only be fought along the lines of sex or gender, but must also consider multiple interlocking identities (e.g., see Munro 2013; see also Pilarski 2011). Some scholars now believe that feminism has entered the fourth wave where the Internet is seen as a tool to further the empowerment of women (Munro 2013).

However, the wave metaphor is contested amongst gender theorists. Some have argued, for example, that it fails to capture the diversity of feminist activism, instead simplifying each ‘wave’ and in doing so neglects to document its multifaceted nature (e.g., see Hewitt 2012). One example of this diversity is the existence of difference feminism which asserts that men and women are different, although difference feminists have not always agreed on whether this is the result of biology or culture (Jensen 1996). In any case, difference feminists, such as Carol Gilligan (1993), maintain that the sexes are equal because it is inappropriate to cast value judgments on their differences. Moreover, due to the ambivalence that many possess towards the term ‘feminism’, some who believe in gender equality have not identified as feminist (e.g., see Page 2013; Redfern and Aune 2010).

Postfeminism has likewise been understood in a variety of ways. As Harris (1999) has noted, it has never had a single definition or ideology, meaning that it has suffered from the same ambiguity as feminism. Similarly, Gamble (2004) has stated that postfeminism is complex and difficult to define precisely, and Aronson (2003) has documented the impact that intersectionality has had upon the diversification of women’s conceptions of feminism, which is now frequently aligned with other marginalized persons.

Faludi’s (1991) research traced the origins of the word to popular media where it was employed to signify a backlash against feminism, and Greer (2014) understands it to be a sexist phenomenon. However, these interpretations have not been universally accepted amongst gender theorists (see Genz and Brabon 2009). Perrin (2016) has nonetheless offered

a helpful summary of differing perspectives of postfeminism. She has placed interpretations of the word into three broad categories. The first category is a belief that perceives feminism to be outmoded and unnecessary in contemporary society. The second category is a reinvigoration of feminism which emphasizes the individual above the collective, and which is more attractive to younger generations. The third category sees postfeminism as a movement that draws on both pre-feminist and feminist ideology.

It is this third conception that Aune (2006) found in her study of British evangelical gender values. She explained that in this context postfeminism is something that refers back to certain strands of feminism in both endorsement and rejection. In particular, Aune asserted that postfeminist expressions display a tension between traditionalist gender values, on the one hand, where separate spheres for men and women are affirmed because gender is differentiated, and egalitarian notions of gender on the other hand where it is believed that differentiation accompanies equality. This avowal of traditional values, however, does not require an intentional look to a particular point in time, but denotes an ideological overlap with pre-feminist gender values. Aune understood this ideological overlap with the past as nostalgic. In keeping with her research, this is the value expressed by this study's participants and so it is this definition of postfeminism that I adopt in this article.

In the present article, I build on previous research in three key ways. Firstly, I demonstrate that these postfeminist values reveal a distinct difference in how male conservative evangelical clergy, within the CofE, think about gender equality when compared to previous studies on this subject, indicating that the gender values found within this strand of clergy have softened in recent years. Secondly, I highlight that, while this expression of postfeminist values therefore demonstrates the potential for conservative evangelicalism to further gender equality within the CofE, it simultaneously suggests that this potential is limited by their particular understanding of gender differentiation. Thirdly, I consider why this simultaneous shift in, and resistance towards, feminist values has occurred by exploring the specific ways in which participants' inhabitancy of evangelical and Anglican traditions shape their thinking.

Methods

I decided to focus on those who belonged to Reform, a conservative evangelical network that emerged in 1993 to oppose women's ordination as priests (Jones 2004) mostly on the basis that they do not believe women should lead churches, and which now protests their consecration as bishops (Reform Covenant 2018). This group was relevant for the purposes of this research because it was anticipated that its members would articulate the traditionalist gender values that are associated with the aforementioned gender inequality. Reform is organized into regional clusters, usually centered around a diocese. One group in the south of England was selected because it is situated in a diocese with a broad range of Anglican traditions, and a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural areas, reflecting something of the CofE as a whole. Participants were selected through the purposive strategy of snowballing. Data saturation was achieved due to the clear repetition of participants' answers from one interview to the next (see Grady 1998). All names used are pseudonyms, and participants' parishes and diocese are undisclosed for the purposes of research ethics.

The data was collected in 2017, the 25th anniversary of the CofE's decision to ordain women as priests, and two years after the consecration of the first women bishops. Participants were thus situated in a Church that had recently undergone significant

change to its ecclesial identity; they were working in an organization that no longer preferred men for positions of seniority for the first time in its history.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 white, male priests between the ages of 30-70. All had middle class upbringings. Most had attended Russell Group universities, predominantly Oxford and Cambridge. Participants, most of whom had elected to go under the authority of a gender traditionalist bishop, discussed their theology in the area of gender roles. Following Burman (1994), all questions were designed to be open-ended in order to capture greater depth and nuance through participants' responses, as well as to reduce the impact of researcher bias. The data was analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Thematic analysis enables one to identify patterns and differences across data (Braun and Clarke 2006), and was therefore adopted in order to identify common threads within the interview data. Narrative analysis enables access to participants' understanding of their experiences (Riessman 2005), thus possessing the efficacy to illuminate how these experiences shape their gender values.

With respect to reflexivity, I identify as a feminist, believing that women have been historically, and are presently, unequal within the CofE. I speculated, prior to the interviews, that participants might well articulate values that contribute to this inequality. I therefore employed two strategies, in addition to asking only open-ended questions, in order to further limit my bias in the research process. Firstly, when participants used tradition-specific language, I clarified its meaning to avoid projecting my own assumptions as a feminist, but also as an Anglican in the open-evangelical tradition. Secondly, in this vein, I asked questions related to participants' tradition, including when I thought I was likely to know the answer.

In order to enable the participants to feel at ease discussing gender, I allowed them to ask any questions prior to interview, both via e-mail and also in person. While I was never asked my feelings towards feminism, on the rare occasion that participants asked for my own theological position on women's ordination, I explained that I thought a contextualized understanding of the relevant biblical passages led me to believe that women could occupy any role within the CofE, but that I was interested in learning why those who hold different theological positions to myself did so, and how they articulated (and understood) their own positions. This allowed for transparency from myself as the researcher and offered participants permission to be open about their own values.

In this study, I adopt an epistemological model referred to as the stratification of reality, whereby this social scientific investigation is understood to offer one of many layers for understanding the beliefs and behaviors of the social world being explored (see Seybold 2007). This means that the reductive approach adopted here does not claim sole explanatory power for understanding my interlocutors, nor does it preclude the possibility of authentic theological conviction in the beliefs examined below. Rather, I seek to identify social factors that contribute to the shaping of the gender values held by male conservative evangelical clergy within the CofE.

I analyzed the data in a two-cycle coding process (see Saldaña 2009). I employed descriptive coding in the first instance, where sections of data were summarized with single phrases from within it, and pattern and focused coding in the second instance where the former allowed me to make connections across the data set and the latter identify the most common codes and thus the most prominent themes. Two themes emerged from the coding process that are most relevant for the present purposes. These are: 'Created order of male headship and female submission' and 'Ambivalent attitudes towards feminism.' The latter consists of

two sub-themes, namely ‘Positive attitudes towards feminism,’ and ‘Negative attitudes towards feminism’.

Created order of male leadership and female submission

Alistair was in his 40s and possessed a Russell Group undergraduate education. He said of he and his wife that:

We are equal in status. [We are] both made in the image of God, both made of the same stuff, both creatures under God as the creator. But we are different in role, and therefore... it's my responsibility and role to function as the head of the household, and it's my wife's role to submit to my leadership in marriage.

Similarly, Ian who was in his 50s, and graduated from a mid-tier university, believed that there were universal female characteristics that made it appropriate for men to lead. He said, “in marriage women need to feel safe... women will follow men but men are much more hesitant to follow women.” Participants affirmed a belief in equality between the sexes, but they also caveated that equality, for them, was distinct from the wider notions of the word because men and women are to perform different social roles, particularly within marriage and the Church (see also Fry 2019b). Participants beliefs somewhat reflected those found within difference feminism given the stated belief in equality alongside gender differences, but they also diverged from it in an important way because they believed that such differences mean that men have authority over women within the marriage context. Thus, while participants appeared to incorporate the language of wider gender values into their own, they did so in a way that led them to rearticulate, rather than abandon, existing Christian tradition on gender roles (see Bruce 2008). Given evangelicalism's historic propensity to espouse restrictive roles for women (Bebbington 1989), the re-articulation of tradition, while comparatively progressive, was nevertheless hardly a clean break from historic beliefs that have contributed to gender inequality. Moreover, the emphasis on the sexes being equal but different reflects the findings of Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016) who found that European Christian women hold such beliefs, suggesting that this is a cross-national phenomenon.

Furthermore, Alistair was alluding to 1 Timothy 2-3, a passage in the New Testament. It cites the creation account in Genesis 2 in order to assert that men, rather than women, are to lead within the Church in first century Ephesus (Drury 2001), although my interlocutors applied this to the marital sphere (see also Fry 2019b). Aune's (2006) participants articulated the same theology. She has drawn on Joan Perkin's (1989) research on Victorian gender roles to explain that this reflects an historic legal view of women as subject to the authority of their husbands. Reform participants also articulated an appreciation for gender values that reflect those from the Victorian era and yet believe them to be found within the Genesis text.

To elaborate, Perkin noted that, according to Common Law, a married woman could not exercise authority in legal matters without permission from her husband. Women also had no legal status. Perkin stated that married women ‘lived under [the husband's] protection or cover, and her condition was called coverture’ prior to 1854 (13). While only one participant was aware of the different ‘waves’ of feminism, my interlocutors also affirmed gender values that were common prior to the advent of so-called first wave feminism, but without realizing that they reflect those from the nineteenth century.

A 'biblical' nostalgia

Additionally, participants looked favorably towards a previous epoch in a nuanced way. In addition to looking to a time prior to the advent of feminism, they also looked to creation itself as, they claimed, the basis for their gender beliefs. Continuing with the same theme, when asked for the rationale for his traditionalist gender values, Ron commented:

I think that God has put an order into creation that men are meant to humbly lead women and that that's very evident in 1 Timothy 2. I think Paul's saying to the church there 'This is what happened, look what happened in the beginning, it went wrong when man failed to exercise his leadership'... [this] applies [to] the family and the Church.

Ron, in his 30s, was an Oxbridge graduate. In the above statement he was referring to the creation accounts in Genesis that are cited in the New Testament. He believed that the text indicates male leadership, and that it is problematic when this is not adhered to. He was referring to Adam and Eve's succumbing to temptation. However, as a contrast to Christian tradition that has tended to blame Eve for usurping Adam (see Parker 2013), in his interpretation of the text, Ron blamed Adam for his lack of leadership. This is in keeping with previous studies in both the US and the UK where evangelicals with gender essentialist beliefs rearticulate tradition in a way that softens their conservative stance on gender roles (Aune 2008; Gallagher 2003).

All participants looked to the Bible's creation narrative as the ideal example for gender roles. They believed that this text prescribes male leadership and female submission within churches and marriage (as exemplified by Alistair and Ron), and believed this is a created pattern for all humanity (as exemplified by Ian). Ron's statement indicates belief in a point in time where these ideals were enacted, as well as a time when they were threatened. Therefore, in addition to looking back to an historic era, participants looked back to the point of creation itself as the exemplar for their gender values.

While Ron referred to the Genesis text as one might any historic event, this does not mean that my interlocutors took this passage literally. Boone (1989) has noted how conservative Protestants do often have a more—albeit selectively—nuanced understanding of scripture than is sometimes recognized. Village (2005) has argued that evangelical Anglicans who tend to take literal approaches to scripture are nevertheless less likely to do so with texts in the Hebrew Bible. Berger (2014) posited that, in reaction to changing societal values, religiously conservative devotees can appeal to an imagined past as a way of finding certainty, and Stringer (1996) explained that religious devotees can believe in symbolic truth without respect to their empirical or scientific validation.

Hence, to assume that my interlocutors held a literal understanding of the Genesis text would be to misunderstand the function that appealing to it had for them. During the interviews, participants were unconcerned with the historical quality of Genesis 2 but considered the gender values they perceived to be contained within it to be important for legitimating their own. Thus, they looked 'back' towards an event with rich symbolic meaning for them in appreciation for the gender values that they believed are found therein.

Ambivalent attitudes towards feminism

This theme will be explored in two sections. The first section concerns participants' positive attitudes towards feminism, whereas the second examines their negative attitudes towards the same phenomenon.

Positive attitudes towards feminism. When asked to define feminism and explore their own personal attitudes towards it, participants were quick to affirm it as a movement that had rightly sought to address issues of inequality through either the marginalization of women in society and/or the dominance of men and their subsequent abuse of power. Justin was an Oxbridge graduate in his 40s. He said, “There are elements to the feminist movement which must be healthy, and good, and right, if they’re reacting to... women [being] subjugated ... And we have to acknowledge that that has [occurred] in society and the Church.” Similarly, Stanley, who had a Master’s degree from a Russell Group university, and was in his 50s, said, “I think there is a lot that’s right with feminism and there was a lot of inappropriate ill treatment of women, because we live in a fallen world and that’s what people with power do.”

All participants articulated an understanding that women have not been afforded the same rights as men historically and understood that through a moral lens. A number explicitly stated that Church teaching has contributed to this, which they saw as a misuse of power and a distortion of the teaching they believed is found in the pages of Judeo-Christian scripture. More specifically, their appreciation for feminism reflects a positive understanding of the increase of equality it brought about. Nevertheless, my interlocutors took the binary categories of female/male for granted unlike some strands of feminism associated with the ‘third wave.’

Negative attitudes towards feminism. Despite recognizing feminism’s positive attributes, participants never identified as feminists. Rather, they all expressed reservations about the feminist movement. All participants believed that the feminist movement in some sense overreached itself and that this was also seen within the CofE. This was expressed as an interpretation of a feminist attack on, and marginalization of, men and/or with the desire to conflate the differences between the sexes, something that was integral to participants’ theology of women’s ordination. Justin, discussing the advent of women priests and bishops, continued:

[Feminism] will often go well beyond [equality] in saying that equal in worth means equal in role and that is where I disagree and that’s where I sense the feminist movement is unable to make that distinction of equal and different ... Difference is good, not bad ... [The CofE] talks about radical inclusion... that... has to include people like [Reform] with our ‘outdated’ and ‘misogynistic’ view of men and women. They’re not outdated and misogynistic, but people [in the CofE] perceive it like that ... We want to be radically included ... [but feminists in the CofE] just assume that... [we] hate women.

Equally, Stanley elaborated:

The danger of feminism would be demonizing men because we always want to blame the other person and not ourselves, so men are the bad guys and women are the innocent victims. And that’s not true because women are fallen and men are fallen... Also, the danger is it denies the created differences between men and women.

Justin believed that feminism is unable to distinguish between the idea that men and women can be equal yet have different roles in the Church. He also stated that this has led the wider CofE to believe that members of Reform are misogynistic and implied that this has led to

their exclusion from its life but did not state any specific instances of this. Stanley's idea that there is a danger in feminism, and that this danger is a direct assault on men's moral failure, is suggestive of an undue attack on men by feminists. Both criticized feminism because they believed that it undermines gender differentiation. These are clear indications of participants' dissatisfaction with the feminist movement and the generalizations made are indicative that those interviewed caricatured it and its adherents. Scholarship that challenges gender differentiation is more nuanced than simply promoting the idea that there is no difference between the sexes, or outright denying the idea that bodies have sexes (see Fry 2019a). Nonetheless, my interlocutors understood feminism to ignore sex differences. Stanley's criticism also makes a generalized claim about feminists given he believes that they tend to demonize men, an accusation often made of feminists during the 'second wave' (see Anderson, Kanner, and Elsayegh 2009).

While the CofE continues to appoint women on unequal terms with men, Justin believed that the denomination has a feminist culture which marginalizes traditionalist evangelical gender values. However, there is evidence that those in the CofE, regardless of tradition, are far more ambivalent about feminism (e.g., Page 2013). In this respect, attitudes towards feminism within the CofE are akin to those held by the wider society which can repudiate feminism, associating it with men-hating women (e.g., Scharff 2012) or which can reject previous 'waves' (e.g., Press 2011). Nevertheless, the change in male-dominated culture, with the advent of women priests being appointed to senior positions, has apparently led participants to believe that the Church has become more feminist than it once was.

Both Justin and Stanley also showed that they were unable to fully appreciate that men have historically wielded greater power than women in Christian discourse. Justin did not appear to recognize the contradiction in his claim that men and women can be equal while men hold positions of power within the CofE's hierarchy and women do not. For him, equality was inherent in one's worth rather than their role. However, he provided no evidence of how this equality of worth may be observed. It remained an abstract concept while, in practical terms, women actually continue to be unequal to men in Justin's ideal for gender roles because they are to submit to men. Stanley also showed a lack of appreciation for the extent to which women have been marginalized and subjugated within the Christian tradition at the hands of men. Like with Justin, Stanley evinced an inconsistency in his thinking: while he accepted that women have been ill-treated by those in power, it is inappropriate to place the blame at the feet of men, despite the fact that it is this sex that has historically held power in the Church.

Moreover, it is pertinent to note that certain strands of evangelicalism have historically resisted feminist developments as they have emerged (Gallagher 2003), including within English Anglicanism (Storkey 1989). It is in keeping with previous research, therefore, that this study's participants showed a level of resistance towards feminism. Also, in response to the advent of evangelical feminism, which emerged during the so-called second and third waves, popular evangelical writers such as Wayne Grudem and John Piper wrote against aspects of the movement by claiming that it contradicts scriptural imperatives and claimed that feminism ignores the differences between men and women (e.g., Piper and Grudem 1991, 1992). On several occasions, participants referenced these writers as important influences on their own thinking. For instance, when asked about the writings that have influenced his gender values, Henry, an Oxbridge graduate in his 40s reported, "I am convinced by the arguments of Grudem. I think he lists a lot of arguments which are very pertinent." Joshua, an Oxbridge graduate in his 30s, replied to the same

question with the comment: “John Piper’s [book] *Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [is] a go to place [for me].”

In this case, what is clearly different about my interlocutors, when compared to the findings of previous studies, is not that there was resistance towards feminism. That is to be expected. Rather, it lies in the fact that there was an evident level of appreciation of feminism and articulation of an understanding that it can aid the Church in highlighting where its use of the Bible has erred. My participants evinced thinking not previously found amongst ordained conservative evangelicals within the CofE, given that previous research has noted either the conscious dismissal of feminist ideology (e.g., Storkey 1989), or its being ignored (e.g., see Hylson-Smith 1992), by clergy within it. In the present study, however, some feminist thought has been consciously incorporated into participants’ value system. I have already outlined other instances where this has been the case within evangelicalism, but this requires further analysis and so I shall reflect upon the implications of this in the discussion section.

Postfeminist gender values

When the above themes are placed side-by-side, one sees that this study’s participants showed the following: firstly, they articulated an appreciation of gender ideals that existed prior to the advent of ‘first wave’ feminism. Secondly, they affirmed certain aspects of the feminist movement that they believe to be good, specifically the notion of greater equality. Thirdly, the clergy interviewed also described some shortcomings they believe it has, chiefly the erosion of distinct spheres for men and women. In other words, those interviewed have evinced the type of postfeminist values found in previous research on evangelicals. That is not to say that those who espoused such values were necessarily aware that they somewhat reflect Victorian ones in particular, but it does mean that they looked favorably on values which incorporated gender differentiation, which in this case included male authority over women. There are, however, a number of additional questions that this analysis raises as well as several points that require elaboration.

Discussion

With respect to the first theme, one is left with the question of the role of Judeo-Christian scripture in the Reform narratives. Participants appealed to biblical texts to support their theological statements regarding the roles of men and women in Church and in the wider society. However, does this indicate that my interlocutors based their beliefs, as Martin Luther would have them, in *sola scriptura*? The answer is simultaneously yes and no. Participants were very clear of the need for theological beliefs and ecclesial practices, including those pertaining to gender, to be supported by biblical texts. This has been shown in their appeal to scripture in order to justify their gender values. In this respect, participants did seek to understand their beliefs through a biblical lens. However, while this suggests that theology is important in their formation, it has become apparent that gender values that have come into existence centuries after the writing of biblical texts have been projected onto them. When Genesis or 1 Timothy were written, the authors were not influenced by post-feminism, however it is defined, simply because it did not exist. In this sense, their post-feminism was not strictly ‘biblical’ in so far as the subjective meaning of the text as advocated by my interlocutors would not be identical to the messages intended by their

authors. Thus, the conservative evangelicals interviewed cannot claim that their gender values stemmed directly and exclusively from the Bible, even though the Bible clearly played an important part in their articulation of them.

Moreover, this theme evidences that participants' postfeminism was more obvious in some contexts than in others. While they believed in biologically determined differences between the sexes, they emphasized the relevance of prescribed gender roles within the family setting and the Church above and beyond other spheres of life (see also Fry 2019b). This is in keeping with Ammerman's (1987) observation that the family unit is of primary importance within evangelicalism as a place where faith may be freely expressed, and is a contrast to the public arena, including the world of work, where the plausibility structures of one's worldview cannot be so easily reinforced.

It is more difficult to place the priesthood within a binary private/public framework. While the UK is increasingly less institutionally religious, the role of the priest in Anglican theology is as a public witness to the mission of the Church, particularly to the CofE, rather than to a partisan organization. In the respect, it straddles both the private and public spheres. More importantly for the present purpose, however, is the fact that members of Reform conflated biblical passages concerning marriage with those concerning Church leadership as they expressed their understanding of gender roles in the Church (see also Fry 2019b). This means that they saw the Church sphere in tandem with the family sphere, indicating that they understood the Church to be a part of the private realm. This is in keeping with the symbolic boundaries that conservative evangelicals have historically drawn between the Church and the wider society (Balmer 2016; Guest 2007).

In the analysis of both themes, I argued that participants had adopted language of equality as found within feminist discourse, as well as articulating an appreciation for the corrective that feminism can offer for the mistreatment of women. On the surface of it, this may seem an unlikely scenario given that my interlocutors were committed to a network that consciously opposes the ordination of women as priests and their consecration as bishops. Nevertheless, as already stated, over time religious tradition is rearticulated rather than merely reproduced (see Bruce 2008). As evangelicals have interacted with modernity, including the development of egalitarian ideals, the way they express their gender values has shifted (Gallagher 2003). Gallagher has argued that as the values within the so-called second and third waves of feminism became increasingly popular, evangelical writers began to respond by expressing alternative gender values, supported with appeals to Judeo-Christian scripture. However, they incorporated feminist values associated with the 'second wave,' arguing for a better treatment of women, whereas previously evangelicals had often rejected the appropriateness of any feminist values (Gallagher 2003). This has also been true for evangelical authors such as Grudem (1994) whose work has been read by my interlocutors.

Additionally, articulating their theory of engaged orthodoxy, Smith, Emerson, Gallagher, Kennedy, and Sikkink (1998) have argued that when evangelicals engage with wider society, they ultimately articulate a softer expression of certain values (see also Gallagher and Smith 1999). This has been true of British evangelicalism (Aune 2006), and other research on conservative evangelicalism within the CofE has concluded that this group exhibit engaged orthodoxy (see Fry 2019a).

Thus, the seemingly unlikely assimilation of some feminist ideals into the gender values of the conservative evangelical tradition is borne out of the process of interaction between those with more traditional and those with more egalitarian gender values. As the

participants read, and claimed to be influenced by, writings from this tradition, I therefore argue that their partial adoption of feminism has been shaped by their embrace of a tradition that interacts with wider society and its more egalitarian gender values. As Vasey-Saunders' (2015) has explained, the religious tradition that one inherits shapes their beliefs.

However, this does not preclude the possibility of a more direct engagement with the wider society shaping their gender values. Reform, true to its wider tradition, does engage with those outside of it. In fact, Reform exists to re-evangelize the nation (Reform Covenant 2018), meaning that its members engage with those outside of the Church in order to gain converts, and Guest (2007) has noted the applicability of Smith et al.'s (1998) theoretical model for other evangelical Anglicans. Additionally, this shift in gender values indicates a modest increase of gender equality given the concern for the positive treatment of women that this group of clergy articulated.

With respect to the second sub-theme, there remains the question of why the participants have decided to then reject certain aspects of feminism. On the one hand, there is the influence of the conservative evangelical tradition which has not incorporated all aspects of feminism. I have shown above that this is particularly true with respect to the challenge to gender differentiation posed by some feminists: the conservative evangelical tradition has criticized feminism (not necessarily accurately) for denying differences between the sexes and in doing so advocates distinct spheres for men and women where the latter must submit to the former.

However, more can be asserted on this front. As evidenced in the analysis of the second theme, participants believed that feminism is dominant in the culture of the CofE, making them and their values more marginal, whereas they had previously been more normative. When people perceive that their social group is undergoing changes in its attributes or characteristics, they can resist such developments within it because it causes a sense of threat to the group identity, something that has been manifest in other Anglican groups over the introduction of women's ordination (see Sani and Reicher 1999, 2000). In light of this, I posit that participants' rejection of other aspects of feminism has also been shaped by this perception of changing gender values within the CofE because it has been seen to amount to a change of the Church's identity.

This leads to the role of Reform membership. Resistance towards changes within a group not only manifests itself through a rejection of the group's new attributes and characteristics but often through schism, particularly when emotions of dejection are present (Sani 2005). Indeed, belonging to break-away groups such as Reform often provides an enclave-like sphere where conservative evangelicals retreat from the changes in society and mainline denominations because it allows such persons to disengage from them by belonging to a group that upholds the plausibility structures of their traditionalist values (see Hunter 1987), even if the presence of engaged orthodoxy means that the group does not function entirely as an enclave. Could membership of Reform, for my interlocutors, be about inhabiting a space where their gender values can be lived out away from those of the wider Church? Consistent with this view, most of my interlocutors had opted to go under the authority of a gender traditionalist bishop rather than submit to their diocesan bishop. Furthermore, participants' sense of marginalization was consistent with the types of dejection emotions that accompany schism. I therefore posit that my interlocutors' sense of marginalization, brought about by the perceived change to the CofE's gender values, shapes the enclave-like role of Reform.

Thinking about the themes together, it is the wider conservative evangelical tradition that limits the modest progress in gender equality amongst conservative evangelical Anglicans as evinced by the participants in this study. This is because it has shaped the particular form of gender differentiation that they articulated, where men are designed to possess authority over women meaning that the latter cannot be truly equal to the former. Moreover, while difference feminists may disagree that the abandoning of gender differentiation is strictly necessary for greater equality within the CofE, there is still room for Anglican clergy in the tradition explored in this article to adopt other feminist values. If my interlocutors allow for a more fluid boundary between Church and family on the one hand, and the wider society on the other, it is likely that one would see members of Reform articulate a yet softer stance towards women. This is because evangelical theology becomes more liberal when such boundaries are not so clearly drawn (Hunter 1987; see also Smith et al. 1998). This means that gender equality within the CofE is at least partially contingent upon how clergy relate to those outside of their immediate tradition, not least those altogether outside of the CofE. The same is true for the extent to which feminist values are adopted within it.

Conclusion

In this article I have identified three previously unnoticed phenomena in the postfeminist gender values of conservative evangelical male clergy within the CofE. Firstly, this group of clergy expressed softer gender values than has been the case previously, articulating an appreciation for certain aspects of feminism. Secondly, because participants have nonetheless continued to resist other aspects of feminism, articulating a theology of male leadership and female submission, any possibility of increasing gender equality within this tradition is limited. Thirdly, participants' current gender values have been shaped by evangelical engagement with the wider society, as well as by their perception of identity change within their own denomination.

The fact that there has been a shift in how gender values amongst conservative evangelical clergy within the CofE are articulated leads to the question of whether they are likely to change in the future. Moreover, by identifying the specific ways that gender discrimination manifests itself within particular contexts, the CofE is better situated to address it. The evidence in this article indicates that, in theory, this can be more readily achieved through increasing conservative evangelical engagement with the wider society. While this will likely be no easy task, Reform is already engaged with the wider society in its effort to re-evangelize the nation and its engagement with it—whether direct or indirect—has been impactful. Future research should therefore direct its efforts accordingly—being attentive to the fact that these values are not entirely static—if female clergy are to face less discrimination within this national institution.

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